

Notes from the Peace Corps

It's a cultural eye-opener on both continents

By Andria Farrell
ANFARREL@CNC.COM

On a brief trip home from Dioila, Mali, Africa, where Gretchen Snoeyenbos is finishing her two years of volunteer service with the Peace Corps, she stopped by her old alma mater — Halifax Elementary School — impressed some kids, and tried to put the past two years in perspective.

"I can't articulate it yet. I can't describe how it has been to be a part of the (Dioila) community and a positive part of the community," she said. "It has been one of the best experiences for me. I think what I will keep the longest is sitting with friends late in the afternoon listening to them talk. That is my iconic Peace Corps experience, the day-to-day chats with my garden ladies."

Snoeyenbos, whose mother Ellen is the Young Adults Librarian at the Duxbury Free Library, said she needed to make a change in her life. After she left college, she was working in the business world — not what she wanted to be doing. The Peace Corps was a way for her to reflect on her life's direction while improving public health, she said.

Snoeyenbos has three goals as part of her Peace Corps program: community development, explaining American culture to the Malians, and explaining Malian culture to Americans.

Snoeyenbos works at the Dioila CSRef, or hospital, where she was able to complete her sanitation project because of fundraising and donations from her home on the South Shore.

"Through the support, emotional and financial, we were able to get six new latrines, six large soak pits, and two wash areas," she said.

The efforts have resulted in a huge improvement for the hospital and her sanitation efforts. The continued support also allowed her to start digging and planting new crops in the women's garden. The South Shore has been instrumental in providing the support for those two things.

"The connection I feel through the two communities is so strong, and it has provided a really sustainable first goal."

Snoeyenbos' time in Bob Dray's class at Halifax elementary helps her further her goal of educating Americans about the Malian culture. Through confer-

ence calls, letters, e-mails, her mother's presentations and class visits, Snoeyenbos has brought a bit of Dioila to Halifax.

Care packages from Dray's class, combined with Snoeyenbos' teaching, brought a bit of her home back to Mali.

She also has been part of a bigger community while living in Dioila. Her friends there can't believe how small her home-

town is.

"There are fewer people in Halifax than in Dioila," she said, which has a population of approximately 12,000.

Snoeyenbos said just being an unmarried woman in her mid 20s in Mali is a huge piece of the cultural exchange. Most 25-year-old women in Mali have two or three children and are in a very different stage of life.

She said the women she is closest to are 50- to 60-year-olds who have time to do some work, and the patience to work with someone who doesn't speak the language well.

"It has been eye-opening to think that my life decisions have been greatly influenced by my luck of birth as an American," she said. "because, as an American, I have an option of not being married with a lot of kids. That has been one of the hardest things to communicate and has had a profound affect on me. What are my values as an American woman, and how do I communicate them?"

But there are also aspects of the Malian culture she would like to bring home.

"Something I learned about (in Mali) that I wish we had more, is a sense of community," Snoeyenbos said.

In Mali, she said, people do not send out invitations to an event. The event — be it wedding, funeral or ceremony — is announced on the radio. If a member of the community knows the person being honored, he is expected to attend the event.

"They live life in a broader community, and it is something I value and hope to create when I return," she said.

She said when she returned sticker shock — gas to food prices — hit her hard. But she said it was not as bad as she thought once she left JFK airport.

When she returns for good this fall Snoeyenbos will begin her long journey through medical school.

"The thing that makes the Peace Corps so wonderful is you're living in a community. The garden women have also done so much for me — being able to be a part of their community, bringing resources they will be able to sustain has been so wonderful," she said.

"But because I am part of the community they do so much for me — it is a two-way street and it has been great."



COURTESY PHOTO

Gretchen Snoeyenbos and her former Halifax Elementary School teacher, Bob Dray, stand in front of the bulletin board in his third-grade classroom that displays highlights of her life as a Peace Corps volunteer in Mali, Africa.



COURTESY PHOTO

Gretchen Snoeyenbos with one of the families she has become friends with in Mali. The children are wearing Halifax Elementary School T-shirts, gifts from Bob Dray's third-grade class last year.

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